

Teachers Learn from Looking Together at Student Work

School reformers say the way to improve education and accountability is by improving the way teachers and students look at student work. Today, Education World examines two collaborative approaches that teachers are using to look at student work. Included: Tips for looking at student work.

Typically, grading papers, exams, and student projects is something a teacher does alone. Other than the teacher, no one usually sees a student's work. Grading is usually a private experience.

School reform advocates at [Harvard Project Zero](#), the [Annenberg Institute for School Reform](#), and the [Coalition of Essential Schools](#) say there is a better way to look at student work. They recommend involving parents, teachers, students, and others in the school community to look at the work together!

MORE THAN A GRADE

"Evaluation, which often takes the form of scoring or grading, is just one purpose [of examining student work]," said David Allen, a researcher at Harvard Project Zero and one of the authors of the book *Looking Together at Student Work: A Companion Guide to Assessing Student Learning* (Teachers College Press).

"Letter grades and even brief comments, such as 'Nice work,' provide students with relatively little information to guide or support them in future tasks or projects," Allen told Education World.

"Assessments should be about providing more and better information to students -- and their families -- about their work.

"The process of looking at student work in a collaborative manner helps teachers take a closer look at how they teach," Allen said. If students are missing the mark and writing horrible papers or doing poorly on final exams, teachers need to find out the reasons for the poor student work.

Tips for Examining Student Work

Following are a handful of tips to help you get started at looking at student work collaboratively. These tips come from *Looking Together at Student Work: A Companion Guide to Assessing Student Learning*, by Tina Blythe, David Allen, and Barbara Schieffelin Powell (Teachers College Press).

First, you must determine a few things before beginning the process:

- Decide when and where your group will meet.
- Select a facilitator, who should have an agenda for the meeting, try not to participate in the substance of the conversation, and maintain a nonjudgmental attitude.
- Determine what you will be learning through this process.

When those decisions have been made, the next choice pertains to the way the student work will be examined. It is helpful to look at student work in a structured way.

In fact, most educators who look at student work in a collaborative process hope to learn about the effectiveness of their instruction, better understand students' learning and development, develop more effective curriculum and assessment, and find ways to help students do higher quality work, Allen said.

Teachers still need to grade their students' work with traditional methods, Allen said. "But bringing samples of student work to the table with your colleagues, looking closely at them, and addressing important questions about teaching and learning has the potential to deepen teachers' understanding of the more traditional -- as well as the innovative -- work they do with students in the classroom," he said.

This process requires time, about an hour or more. Schools need to factor in time for teachers to work together in this way on an ongoing basis, he said. "We are beginning to see some models of how time can be provided for looking at student work with colleagues on a regular basis," Allen said. In some cases, this involves creating time during or after the school day; in other cases, it means shifting time already allotted for staff development, team planning, or other faculty work. We need to get beyond the mind-set that teachers spend almost all of their time with their students or by themselves correcting papers and planning lessons, said Allen.

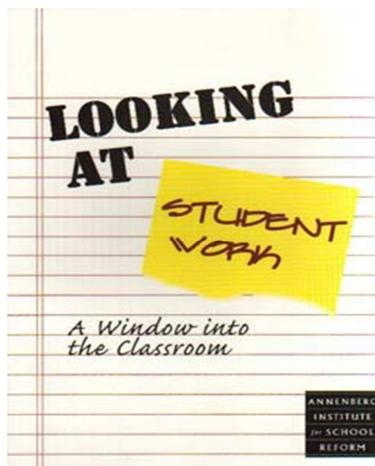
"Time with colleagues spent in focused inquiry about teaching and learning is a necessity, not a luxury," he said.

YARMOUTH HIGH SCHOOL FINDS THE TIME

The faculty at Yarmouth (Maine) High School gets together each Wednesday morning -- in part to look at student work. Time has been built into their weekly schedule because the school has a delayed start on that day each week.

"I really love our culture here of collaborative work and knowing that student work improves," said Wendy Houlihan, principal of Yarmouth High School. "The beauty of the whole inquiry process of looking at student work is that it changes [teachers'] instruction, their rubric, and how they give out the assignments."

The faculty had been looking at student work collaboratively for more than four years, but a grant from the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund to Southern Maine Partnership's [Improving Instruction Through Inquiry and Collaboration](#) project helped formalize it. The grant helped pay for additional teacher workshops and other costs associated with training teachers.



Collaborative inquiry has made a difference, Houlihan told Education World. The quality of student work has improved, in part, because teachers have changed the way they give assignments or instruction based on their group meetings. For example, science teachers revised an assignment that required students to report lab results as if they were writing for a newspaper. After looking at the assignment with other teachers,

they realized they had not instructed the students on how to write a newspaper article.

However, there are still some teachers not sold on the benefits of looking at student work together. "This has been a huge paradigm shift with student work and the focus of teaming these past two years," Houlihan said, noting that some staff members prefer the more traditional way of evaluating student work.

QUALITY OF WORK REFLECTS TEACHER DEMAND

Regardless of whether teachers like looking at student work together, the quality of the work teaches a lesson about what is happening inside a classroom, researchers say.

The Consortium on Chicago School Research looked at student work on a large scale to determine the level of intellectual demands placed on elementary-grade students in Chicago Public Schools. Funded by a grant from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform, the consortium studied 1,400 pieces of student work.

The study found that 70 percent of the work presented either no challenge or minimal challenge to the students. They also found that if students were given more challenging assignments, they did higher quality work.

"Overall, the quality of authentic intellectual work demanded by the schools and completed by the students is low, but teachers who assign the highest quality work get it from students," said Fred M. Newmann, professor emeritus of education at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, who conducted the study with researchers Anthony S. Bryk and Gudelia Lopez.

In fact, their research found that those students who were assigned more demanding intellectual work scored about 50 percentile points higher on authentic measures of student achievement compared with students whose teachers assigned less demanding work, Newman told Education World.

The study found that assignments that don't go beyond reproducing information, such as filling in the blanks, wouldn't prepare students for intellectual challenges posed by the modern workplace and by civic and personal affairs.

ADDITIONAL ONLINE RESOURCES ABOUT LOOKING AT STUDENT WORK

- [Looking Collaboratively at Student Work: An Essential Toolkit](#) Looking closely together at student work can unveil a treasure trove of insights to guide school communities as they reflect on their purpose, assess their progress, and plan strategies for reaching all

Looking at Student Work Video

Check out the video
[Looking at Student
Work: A Window Into
the Classroom.](#)

children better. It's scary work, though, and respectful protocols can help. This "Toolkit" includes many resources, including Guidelines for Learning from Student Work, The Collaborative Assessment Conference, and What to Look for in Student Work: Some Standards for 'Authenticity.'

- [Protocol for Looking at Student Work](#) The Coalition of Essential Schools suggests this descriptive review protocol for looking at student work.
- [Improving Instruction Through Inquiry and Collaboration](#) This site offers practical tools for examining student work, instituting peer observation, and coaching. It provides links to three Southern Maine Partnership schools participating in the IITIC project.
- [The Cycle of Inquiry and Action: Essential Learning Communities](#) This site includes protocols for examining student work and explains why, in a true learning community, inquiry becomes everybody's work.

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